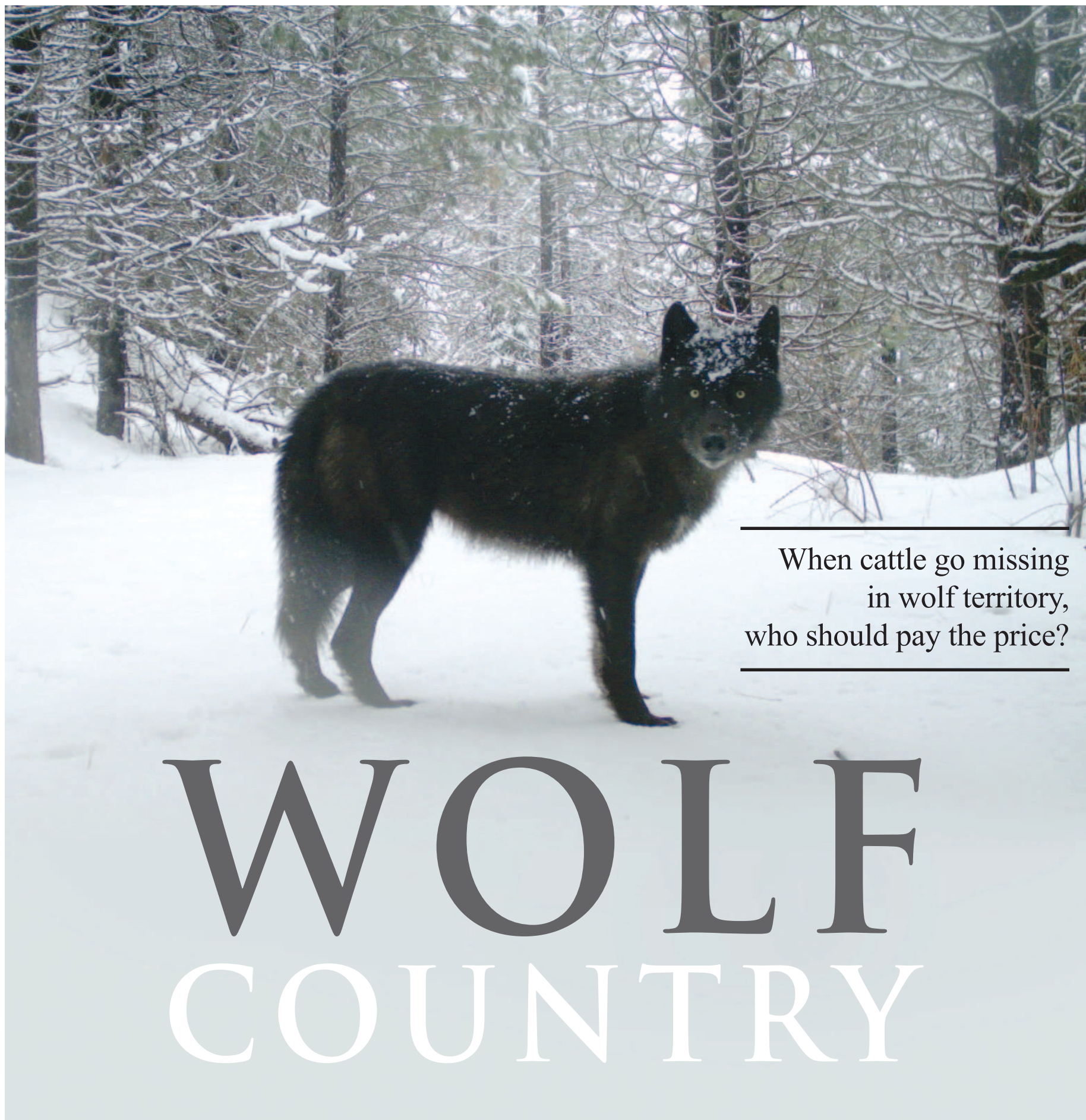




When cattle go missing
in wolf territory,
who should pay the price?

WOLF COUNTRY

By GLORIA DICKIE
High Country News

Just before dawn on a chilly day last September, a volunteer range rider left camp in Marr Flat, a ponderosa-pine plain in Wallowa County where ranchers run 200 cattle on private land each summer. The cows were due down by month's end and the rider was looking for stragglers. Not 30 minutes later, he found something else — the ribcage of a half-eaten calf, gleaming in the sun.

When Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist Pat Matthews came to investigate, he found a carcass ringed by wolf tracks and covered in bite marks. GPS pinpointed a radio-collared member of the Harl Butte Pack nearby. Roblyn Brown, Oregon's acting wolf coordinator, agreed with Matthews: A wolf had killed the calf.

Armed with this information, Todd Nash, its owner, requested and received \$930 from the state — the calf's official value. Oregon, like many states where wolves have made a comeback, has a taxpayer-funded program that compensates ranchers for livestock killed by the predators, offsetting some of the direct costs ranchers bear for their return. In theory, this should also help wolf conservation by encouraging rural areas long at odds with wolves to eventually accept their presence.

Before its adoption in 2011, some believed Oregon's compensation program might be more successful than others in this regard. Oregon's urban areas expanded support for wolves' re-entry, and legislators had years of data and experience to draw on from other Western states where wolves had returned earlier. The program required ranchers to implement nonlethal wolf deterrents in order to be reimbursed — something environmental groups like Oregon Wild valued. It also gave rural communities more oversight, and recognized the challenges ranchers face in an already marginal business by adopting provisions for missing livestock.

Seven years later, the rate of increase of confirmed livestock kills has remained below the growth rate of the state's wolf population, which increased



from 48 in 2012 to 124 by the end of 2017. Brown believes ranchers are implementing best practices for keeping livestock safe.

"Producers are learning from other producers," she says.

But signs of trouble have emerged in the first fully participating counties, suggesting potential pitfalls for other counties as they ramp up the program. In Wallowa and Baker counties, local oversight of loss claims has proven unbalanced or thin in key cases, leading to approval of suspicious compensation requests. Confirmed wolf kills may not have skyrocketed, but missing cattle claims have, far outpacing them. Between 2012 and 2018, the state paid nearly \$177,000 for missing livestock in just three counties, more than double the total amount paid for direct losses in the nine counties that have been eligible for compensation. Critics fear the program's missing-cow allowance is being abused. Ranchers counter that the state's official wolf population — and depredation — numbers are too low.

Whatever the reason, such claims have serious implications for both ranchers and wolves. State funding has stayed roughly the same since 2014 — \$200,000 every two years, plus a smaller federal grant for preventive measures that the state must match. Increasingly, officials have been forced to cut back on wholly fulfilling missing cattle claims and funding requests for nonlethal deterrents in hopes of stretching the money.

And despite everything, ranchers don't appear any closer to accepting wolves. This raises questions about whether there are better ways to incentivize coexistence, and it shows just how controversial wolves can be — even when all the pieces seem in place to support their return.

As Wallowa's wolf population grew, local rancher Dennis Sheehy began looking for ways to protect cattlemen's interests. Sheehy, a slow talker with bright, crinkly eyes whose life has

TOP: A wolf of the Wenaha Pack captured on a remote camera on U.S. Forest Service land in northern Wallowa County in February 2017.

CENTER: Three wolves from the Walla Walla pack in Umatilla County. Remote camera image taken Jan. 13, 2017.

Photos contributed by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

"I think that you're going to face some risks if you have your animals up in outlying areas."

Larry Givens,
County Commissioner

See WOLVES/6C